

# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —

### **A *Chilkat* Remembrance**

My first year sailing as a master (captain) began in November 1988 when I was assigned to the M/V *Chilkat*, the “Queen of the Fleet”. Built in 1957 in Tacoma, Washington by the Matinac Shipbuilding Corporation, the *Chilkat* had been in service since 1957, six years before the Alaska Marine Highway began its official operations. A small, box-like, blunt-nosed vessel with a loading ramp on the bow, the *Chilkat* was ninety-nine feet long, thirty-three feet wide, weighing 256 tons with 470 horsepower and twin propellers providing a service speed of 10 knots.

As I boarded her for my first captain’s assignment, an annual U.S. Coast Guard inspection was being conducted in order to receive a Certificate of Inspection to allow the vessel to sail. I can never forget how the inspector wanted to see the wheelhouse window wiper operate. Suspended outside and underneath the window visor, I turned the control knob. We heard a buzzing noise, but the wiper refused to budge. I turned the control knob higher. A loud bang and an explosion of blue light and smoke from the wiper motor followed, sending the cover of the wiper motor forward and over the bow into the water. Our inspector smiled, pointing out the good news that we were now going to get a new wiper motor.

Systematically, item by item, the inspection went well, with one remaining discrepancy to address. *Chilkat*’s toilet seat in the public head (restroom) was U-shaped and therefore was non-regulation and out of compliance. We replaced it with an oval-shaped, regulation toilet seat, received our Certificate of Inspection, and were soon underway to the satisfaction of all.

With new twin Caterpillar diesel engines, and a new steering system, her large diameter brass steering wheel had been replaced with a much smaller wheel that somehow seemed to diminish her stature, but not her character.



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Carrying fifty-nine passengers and fifteen vehicles, the *Chilkat* did not have a bow thruster to assist in maneuvering. She had a sitting lounge for the passengers and a warm galley with an oil-fired range. This was the warmest location on the ship outside of the engine room. Here passengers and crew mingled. A large, simmering coffee pot was kept going continually.

*Chilkat* had an illustrious career with the Alaska Marine Highway System, pioneering the Juneau to Hoonah route, the Ketchikan to Hollis (Prince of Wales Island) route, and the various routes the Marine Highway uses in Prince William Sound. Among the Marine Highway fleet, it was generally acknowledged that the *Chilkat*, “was tougher than the sailors who sailed her.” All new shipmasters with the Alaska Marine Highway System typically began their captaincy with an assignment on the *Chilkat*, the vessel serving as a kind of proving ground and training platform for new Marine Highway shipmasters.

A good captain must perform a number of duties. The primary duty is deliver passengers and cargo safely to the next port while exercising safe navigation, conning a ship through narrow waterways like Wrangell Narrows, maneuvering into tight harbors like Killisnoo Harbor, or Hollis, and docking and undocking an unwieldy ship. However, there is much more that goes unseen as recording, processing, and reviewing vessel trim and stability, vessel draft, tide and current calculations, accident, and traffic reports. Writing a weekly report is required, as well as implementing wheelhouse policies, watch standing orders, night orders, supervising department heads, and executing standard operating procedures. Conducting fire and abandon ship drills weekly are mandatory as well as conducting a weekly safety meeting with the department heads and crew.

A captain must represent shoreside management, be in command of rescue operations, and resolve passenger and crew disputes if they rise above the



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level of the chief purser, chief engineer or the chief mate. At all times, observe the *Navigation Rules*, the international nautical rules of the road. A shipmaster must provide to shoreside management scheduling, personnel and maintenance recommendations, submit ship maintenance requests, maintain the vessel's certificates, and write memorandums, letters, and shipboard directives. Moreover, a shipmaster must manage shipyard workflow, and most importantly, exemplify good behavior, demeanor, and bearing for both the crew and the public.

My mentor, Captain Payne, called me into his office saying, "I was apprehensive when I first sailed as a master. No one ever feels adequately prepared for this step, but trust me, Bill, you're ready." Regardless of his comforting words, stepping out as a captain was a steep learning curve. First riding the *Aurora* with Captain Ed Williams of Ketchikan, I wanted to learn the piloting techniques he used for navigating into and out of Port Chester, Metlakatla's harbor, sixteen miles southeast of Ketchikan. Captain Williams was a long-time master of the *Chilkat* and knew the vessel and route as few did.

At the time, Metlakatla was the only community that the *Chilkat* served. Her propeller shafts were pitted by saltwater corrosion and regardless of her new Caterpillar engines and steering system, the U.S. Coast Guard would not allow her travel across Clarence Strait to Hollis on Prince of Wales Island with pitted propeller shafts as a measure of safety. Additionally, the old Chilkat dock in Metlakatla was out of service and we could not load vehicles. Our only option was to dock at the Annette Bay Packing Company cannery dock and board passengers with an aluminum brow (gangway) from *Chilkat*'s housetop.

Port Chester can be an unforgiving harbor requiring precise navigation. Captain Williams knew the approaches thoroughly, pointing out some of the natural features he used for making course changes. For example, Captain



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Ed observed the Metlakatla Boat Harbor Light #2, flashing red every 2.5 seconds at night, or its bright red day board in the daylight hours, and when either became visible between two small, round Scrub Islands, he changed course. This lineup marked the precise location and time for the final course change into Port Chester. Equally, it was the same when departing. It was the kind of course change that could not be made too soon, or too late, but only when the light or its day board became visible between the two islands. Captain Williams commented, “It’s as though God put these things here for us to use.” We used them religiously.

Equally, I inquired nervously with Captain Williams about the *Chilkat*’s handling characteristics when he cautioned without any hesitation, “The main thing to remember about the *Chilkat* is that she goes sideways faster than she goes ahead or astern.” With that, I was on my own.

Additional to the above requirements for a shipmaster, a captain on the *Chilkat* served as the chief purser, responsible selling passenger tickets, depositing the weekly revenue into the vessel’s bank account with First Bank in Ketchikan, subject to financial audit. One night leaving Metlakatla, able seaman Billie Neville was steering outbound from Metlakatla. I was at the chart table on the port side facing aft, selling tickets. A line of passengers filed through the wheelhouse from the starboard side and exited out the port side door, passing in front of the bench seat along the aft bulkhead on the starboard side, and behind the helmsman steering the vessel. Selling tickets, collecting fares, and making change, I used the top chart table drawer as the cash box. Billie turned nervously toward me saying, “Mr. Purser, call the Captain! We have traffic in front of us.”

Our wheelhouse windows were fogging up with moisture, when a Native elder, sitting on the bench seat, went down to the galley and returned with a bar of Ivory soap. Rubbing the soap on the windows and wiping them clean



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with a towel the window condensation went away. We could see the vessel traffic ahead with clarity. I never forgot that practical lesson in seamanship.

*Chilkat*'s chief engineer, Dale Whitesides, warned that the vessel had been inactive in shipyard awhile, and there could be sediment in the fuel filters. Dale explained, however, that he was prepared with backup filters by opening a set of valves to divert the fuel flow toward the newer, cleaner filters if the engines should falter from plugged main fuel filters. We sailed without incident.

It is an old truth, however, that things go wrong when you least want them to go wrong. A few days into my tenure as master of the *Chilkat*, we were unloading our passengers in Ketchikan as an increasing southeastern wind began to blow. Each night in Ketchikan at the end of each day, we unloaded, backed away from the main slip and shifted to the outside of the slip and tied up for the night. Known to the crew as the "West Fence," maneuvering to this dock face was to accommodate the Ketchikan airport ferry using the main slip every hour to provide transportation to and from Ketchikan's airport located on Gravina Island. Southeast wind was blowing straight into the dock at thirty knots and I confidently backed away from the main slip into the wind.

Once clear of the dock, I stopped backing and eased the throttles ahead to dash alongside the West Fence before the wind had much effect on the ship. At that moment, both engines coughed and died. With suddenness, *Chilkat* turned sideways to the wind and began drifting toward the riprap shoreline with stunning rapidity. In a few moments, *Chilkat* fortuitously came to rest, pressed hard against a teepee dolphin made of creosote pilings just offshore of riprap boulders and right alongside the Ketchikan Ferry Terminal. Balanced just right on the teepee dolphin, the *Chilkat* teetered with her bow pointing toward the West Fence.





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Chief Engineer Whitesides soon had the starboard engine running again. With that, I was able to move ahead and press the *Chilkat*'s blunt-nosed bow into the side of the West Fence while the stern continued resting on the teepee dolphin. Able seaman Billie Neville jumped ashore onto the West Fence, while able seaman Deli Charles rigged a spring line and passed it to Billie on the West Fence. With hard left rudder, a starboard engine, and a spring line made fast, we were able to come around and get the vessel alongside the West Fence and secured for the long, windy night.

While all of this was going on, our sister ship, the much larger *Matanuska* was moored directly behind the *Chilkat* alongside the Main Berth of the Ketchikan Ferry Terminal. Officers were on her port bridge wing watching our dilemma with binoculars, no doubt observing *Chilkat*'s new skipper handling his trial by fire. I narrowly escaped going aground; the teepee dolphin and an expert crew saved the vessel from almost certain grounding.

*Matanuska* sailed for Prince Rupert, B.C. on schedule. All that night the wind steadily increased, as is common in Ketchikan, accompanied with heavy, horizontal rain. Dawn broke stormy with storm-force winds, blowing southeast sixty knots at Ketchikan and seventy knots at Metlakatla. Knowing that the wind is stronger in Metlakatla, subject to violent williwaws where the dock's windsock can go around in circles, I canceled our sailing that morning.

Later that day, the *Matanuska* was returning from Prince Rupert with storm-force southeast wind on her stern. Slowing down to approach the Ketchikan Main Berth, the wind overcame the vessel's maneuvering strength and she turned sideways to the wind. Sailors rushed through main hatch to the foredeck hand over fist to clear both anchors as the *Matanuska* drifted up Tongass Narrows out of control for some distance past the Ketchikan shipyard until her good captain could get his vessel straightened out. It was our turn on the *Chilkat* to observe them in their



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substantial predicament and moment of high stress. *Matanuska* turned around near Ward Cove and returned to the Main Berth facing southbound into the wind. Humbled by the wind as both *Chilkat* and *Matanuska* were, we made no comments to each other and maintained radio silence.

Not long after my short tenure on the *Chilkat*, she was sold in late 1988 into private hands to become a cannery tender. In my travels with the Alaska Marine Highway, we would see our beloved Queen of the Fleet everywhere, sometimes at Sitka, or Bellingham, Washington, and lastly, forlornly moored on a mooring buoy in far away Seldovia Bay on the lower Kenai Peninsula. She was rusty and battered, but still carrying her Marine Highway colors of white superstructure, blue hull, blue stack with yellow stars of the Big Dipper, and a yellow stripe from stem to stern below the main deck. We salute her and remember her with respect and fondness.

Written and Article Provided by Captain Bill Hopkins, AMHS Retired





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## Farewell to the first vessel of the fleet!



The snub-nosed M/V *CHILKAT*, designed and constructed for \$100,000 was placed in service in the spring of 1957. Under contract between the Territory of Alaska and a private operator the M/V *CHILKAT* provided service between Tee Harbor and Haines. The 100 foot ship had a service speed of 10 knots and was capable of carrying 59 passengers and 15 vehicles of standard lengths. The M/V *CHILKAT* was given to the State of Alaska by the Territorial government following admission to the Union.



With the addition of three new 352-foot vessels to the Southeast fleet in 1963 and the M/V *CHILKAT*'s renovation in the winter of 1964 the ship was transferred to

Prince William Sound to provide year-round service to Cordova and Valdez. The M/V *CHILKAT* was later returned to Southeast Alaska and last sailed for the System

in 1988 between Metlakatla and Ketchikan.

A fond farewell to our first "blue canoe!"